

The Son of God Goes into Battle

I. Against Satan

II. For Us

Matthew 4:1–11

¹Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ²After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

⁴Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

⁷Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Just for a minute, I want you to think about this question. Throughout the course of your life, what's the toughest fight you've ever been in? Maybe there was a time when you and another kid just went at it on the playground, throwing punches and wrestling on the ground. Or you got caught up in a bar fight, and ended up with your jaw broken. (Been there. Done that.) Or maybe you served in the military and were in a gun battle where the bullets were flying and you were literally fighting for your life. You realize, no matter how bad that fight was, it's not as dangerous as the one that you and I are fighting right now. It's a battle that will not result in broken bones or even lost lives, but will determine whether our souls spend an eternity with God or apart from God. And the enemy we are fighting is not the neighborhood bully, or radical terrorist. We're up against the Devil himself. How did Saint Paul put it? *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:12).* St. Peter put it even more bluntly. *Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:7).* Every day of our lives, Satan is fighting tooth and nail to lead us into sin and away from God. And if we're honest, we'll admit that all too often we're losing those battles against Satan.

But here's the thing. There is Someone who has already fought every battle against Satan and has won every one of them for us. And in so doing, Jesus has not only given us hope for the future. He's also given us some tactics we can use to win our battles against the Enemy in our everyday lives.

Today we turn our attention to Matthew's inspired account of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the desert. What we are going to do is not unlike what a football coach might do. We are going to shout out our opponent. You might say that we are going to watch some game film. We're going to see what tactics Satan used against Jesus—tactics which he still uses against us. And then, we're going to see how Jesus countered those tactics with methods we can still use today. Our theme for the day is simply this.

The Son of God Goes into Battle

I. Against Satan.

II. And for us.

Our text begins, *Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.* In other words, this whole confrontation in the wilderness, this battle between Jesus and the devil, was something that God not only allowed Jesus to endure, it was something that God wanted him to endure. It was as if God was saying, "Okay Jesus, if you're going to be the Messiah, if you are going to rescue fallen man, you're going to have to defeat the one who currently holds fallen man captive." As the old saying goes, if you want to be the best, you have to beat the best. That's what God was setting up Jesus to do. Right out of the gate (this event very early in Jesus earthly ministry) God sends his Son into the desert to be tempted. And just to make it a little tougher on Jesus, God has his Son fast for 40 days and 40 nights. We can only imagine how physically weak that would have left Jesus, as a true human being.

Well, it's at that point in time that Satan brings his first temptation. (Actually, this is not the first time that Satan tempted Jesus in the desert. In his parallel account, Luke tells us that the devil tempted Jesus throughout the course of all 40 days. This was simply the first temptation that gospel writers were inspired to record.) Matthew writes, *The tempter came to [Jesus] and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."* I want you to notice a number of things about the tactics that Satan is using there. Notice how Satan is first trying to sow seeds of doubt in Jesus mind. He begins, "if you really are the Son of God..." In other words, "If you have this special connection to God, if your Father in heaven really loves you, then why is he putting you through this? Why is he forcing you to starve out here in the desert?"

My friends, doesn't Satan use the same tactic on us today? He loves to whisper in our ear, "If God really loves you, if God is really all powerful, then why is your life so hard? Why do you have to scrimp and save, just to pay the bills? If you are really loved by God, why did he have your loved one die? Are you sure you are a child of God?" That's Satan's first tactic with Jesus and us. He tries to get us to question whether God really cares about us, whether he really has our best interest in mind.

From there, Satan goes on to a second tactic. In this same temptation, Satan tries to get Jesus to misuse his power, misuse his position. Satan says, in effect, "If you really are the Son of God, then why don't you do something to alleviate your pain? You shouldn't have to suffer so. C'mon do something to make your life easier. Jesus, you deserve a break today."

Sound familiar? No, I don't mean the old MacDonald's ad. I mean what Satan still says to us today. He says, "Go ahead, make your life easier. You don't feel like putting in a full day's work? Then don't. Goof off, surf the Internet. Waste your time. Or if your marriage is causing you pain, walk away from it. God wouldn't want you to be unhappy. Besides, if you break your

marriage, God will forgive you in the end.” You realize, who's talking there, don't you? That's Satan talking! He still uses on us the same tactics used on Jesus. Every day, Satan tempts us to take the easy way out, do what feels good—rather than what God wants.

Oh yes, notice one more tactic that Satan uses. He always tailors his temptations to fit the target. In other words, he hits us where we are the weakest. Wasn't that true with Jesus? After Jesus goes without food for 40 days, what does Satan tempt Jesus with? Food! Satan knows that's what Jesus' body would be craving. Doesn't the devil use the same tactic on us? He finds our weak spots. Our pet sins. If you are a 90 year old grandmother, is Satan going to tempt you to stay up all night playing video games? If you are a 16 year old boy, do you think Satan is going to tempt you to worry about where you left your walker? No, it's the other way around. Satan tailors the temptation to fit the target. He knows our weaknesses and uses them to his advantage.

But notice that even though Satan did that to Jesus, Jesus had the perfect defense to counter Satan's temptation. Jesus points to Scripture. He says to Satan, *“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”* In other words, Jesus says, “Far more important than food for my stomach is doing what God would have me do.” Or as Jesus later told his disciples, *“My food is to do the will of him who sent me.”* (John 4:34).

So, do Jesus' words to the devil have any application for our battle against Satan? Absolutely. When Satan leads us to question whether God really loves us, when he tempts us to take the path of self-indulgence, when he tempts us to abuse the freedom he has given us, that's when we need to go back to the Word and say, “God, what would you have me do? What is your will for my life?”

But of course, Satan doesn't give up easily on Jesus or us. Satan comes with a second temptation, in this case quoting Scripture, trying to get Jesus to test God rather than trust God. Isn't that right? Satan takes Jesus to the high point of the temple complex and again uses those same words, *“If you are the Son of God...(in this case) throw yourself down.”* And then Satan quotes Psalm 91, *“For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”* What's Satan trying to say? He's saying, “Jesus if you really believe in God, you should take him at his word. He says he'll protect you, so prove that you are putting your faith in him by jumping off this precipice.”

Again, doesn't Satan use that same tactic on us today? He comes to us and says, “God says that he will protect you from harm. So, why not have a few more beers before you get behind the wheel?” Or, “God says, ‘Don't worry about tomorrow.’ So it doesn't matter how much credit card debt you rack up. It doesn't matter whether you pay your bills. It doesn't matter whether you find a job or not.”

So, how does Jesus counter that kind of temptation in his life? He points to another Bible verse which really does speak to what Satan is inviting him to do. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 when he says to Satan, *“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”* That passage is a reference to a time when the children of Israel were in the desert. God promised that he would provide them with food and water. But they weren't satisfied to just trust God. Instead they tested God. They complained against God. They demanded that God perform a miracle for them—on their timetable. Well, Jesus correctly recognized that that's exactly what Satan was proposing that Jesus do. “Recklessly jump off the temple and then demand that God perform a miracle to rescue Jesus from certain death.” But that would not be trusting God. It would be

testing God. And that's a sin. By using Scripture, Jesus defeated Satan's temptation.

But there's one more temptation that Satan uses against Jesus, a temptation that Satan loves to use on us today. In this final temptation, Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, all their wealth, and simply said, "*All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me.*" Now, in our case, Satan doesn't have to offer us all the kingdoms of the world. He can get by, by offering us something like an extra hour of sleep on a Sunday morning, or a little sexual fantasy on the internet or the satisfaction of putting someone in their place or holding a grudge or refusing to forgive—all of which are examples of us putting Satan ahead of God in our hearts. That's why Jesus counters all those temptations with the words of Deuteronomy 6:13, "*It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'*"

Once again, Jesus uses the most powerful weapon in the world. He uses what St. Paul called, *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* (Eph. 6:17). But like any weapon, if you are going to use the weapon correctly, you need to know how to handle it. You might say that owning a Bible is a little like owning a handgun. If you've never handled a handgun, if you've never practiced with it, if you're not comfortable using it, then when you really need it, it will do you no good. In fact, it might do more harm than good. So it is with the Bible. If you get to know that weapon, if you learn how to use it, maybe take some lessons on it, then when your enemy threatens you, you will be prepared to defend yourself.

The point is simply this. Learn to know the Scriptures, whether it's by reading the Bible on your own, or by participating in a Life Group or Bible class, or listening to a sermon like this one and then discussing it with a friend or family member, using the life guide in the back of church. Know your Scriptures, so you can fight the temptations of the Evil One, just as Jesus did.

And yet, I have to tell you that the real lesson for us to take home from this account is not merely "Do what Jesus did. You know, use your Bible to fight the devil." Even though that's great advice, and pleasing to God, the fact is, even when we know our scriptures, even when we apply them to our lives, even when we pray to God to help us say "no" to temptations, still too often we fail. We fall into sin. And it fills our hearts with guilt and shame.

My friends, when that happens, I want you look back to this account of Jesus going into battle against Satan—not so you can see what you should have done better. But rather, so you can see what Jesus did perfectly. Jesus overcame every one of Satan's temptations, not just here in the desert but every day of his life. The writer to the Hebrews says, *Jesus has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.* (Heb. 4:15). And the reason Jesus overcame every temptation, the reason he lived a perfect life, is so that God could give that perfection to you, as a free gift. Through faith in Jesus Christ, God sees you as a holy person. In God's eyes, you look just like Jesus. In fact, how does St Paul put it? *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.* (Gal. 3:26)

Do you realize what that means? It means that the victory that Jesus won over the devil in the desert, and more importantly, the victory he won over Satan on the cross and from the grave, is now your victory. Your enemy has been defeated by Jesus, for you. That means that when Satan comes tempting you, you can say, "Sorry, Satan, you can't tell me what to do. You're not my Lord. Jesus is. So in his name I say to you what Jesus said to you in the desert, "*Away from me, Satan!*" St. James said it well, *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you* (James 4:7). My friends, you can be sure that until the day you die, your battles with Satan will continue. But the war? The final outcome? That's already been won, by Christ, for you. Believe it. And live it. Amen.